

TREATIES &

Ancient Near Eastern Legal Terminology in the Book of Mormon

RoseAnn Benson
and
Stephen D. Ricks

A **FASCINATING CONNECTION** between Old Testament covenants and ancient Near Eastern treaties was discovered in 1951. That year, a generation after several such treaties became available for examination, Elias Bickerman showed that those treaties and Old Testament covenants exhibit many of the same literary elements (see accompanying sidebar).

Drawing on Bickerman's observations, Herbert Huffmon found another common dimension in ancient treaties and covenants. He demonstrated that the Hebrew word יָדָע (*yādaʿ*), "to know," bore

an additional meaning—"to enter into a binding agreement"—a meaning that has parallels in Old Testament covenant language and ancient Near Eastern treaty terminology.¹ Delbert Hillers, citing Huffmon, observed that understanding the lexical point regarding the verb *to know*, in the sense of "to recognize" a covenant, is important for two reasons. First, it affords a personal benefit in "understanding what the Old Testament means by 'knowing God.'" Second, it supports a "connection between prophetic language and thought and the terminology associated with treaty relationships," meaning

COVENANTS



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that prophets spoke of covenants in language that framed legal responsibilities between God and his people.² For Latter-day Saints who understand that obedience to covenants undergirds the law of eternal progression, or the manner in which humans can eventually become like God, these insights on *to know* provide new ways of thinking about covenants.³

Since the Book of Mormon arose out of the Old Testament era, it seems likely that both works present similar meanings of the verb *to know*. As this paper will show, the same or a similar meaning of

to know as used in ancient Near Eastern treaties is found in Book of Mormon covenants, illustrating another link between the Book of Mormon and the ancient Near East. In order to understand Book of Mormon covenants in this context, we will first discuss the background of the word *to know*, next compare treaties and covenants, then discuss *to know* in connection with ancient Near Eastern treaties and biblical covenants, and finally assess *to know* in Book of Mormon covenants.

Ancient Near Eastern Background

Meaning of the verb to know. The verb *to know* is common to most Semitic languages and has a wide variety of meanings that can be figurative, literal, euphemistic, or inferential,⁴ such as “to understand”; “to come to the knowledge of, by seeing, by hearing, and by experience”; “to know how”; and “to be wise.”⁵ In covenant language, *to know* indicates “God’s knowledge,” primarily in reference to people, with care for those whom he *knows*; “knowledge of God,” that is, an understanding of where one stands in relation to God; and ignorance of God, meaning “failure to practice the filial relationship in which they [humankind] stand with God.”⁶ These meanings characterize the special relationship between God and his people, Israel, and within this use of *to know* stands the covenant relationship that has parallels in ancient Near Eastern treaties.

We note also that *to know* signifies the intimate relationship involved in marriage, further amplifying the meaning of this word, hence its common use as an Old Testament metaphor symbolizing the special covenant relationship between God and his people. The marriage bond, as a symbol of the

covenant relationship between God and the house of Israel, is found only in the Old Testament.⁷ The prophet Hosea was the first to equate the Sinai covenant with marriage. The prophets Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel built upon his symbolism.⁸ Metaphorical marriage reflected literal marriage; therefore, God’s relationship with Israel was intimate, and he expected absolute fidelity.⁹

In summary, many ancient Near Eastern treaties repeat the verb *to know* in the technical sense of “to recognize a legal relationship” and “to recognize treaty stipulations as binding.”¹⁰ “Thus verbs meaning ‘to know’ in ordinary contexts,” Hilliers informs us, “were used for ‘to recognize,’ ‘be loyal to,’ in the vocabulary of international relations over a wide range of the ancient world.”¹¹ *To know*, therefore, conveyed terms of the treaty relationship as well as its obligations. Old Testament covenants use the verb *to know* in the very same senses, with the added dimension of either marital or sexual intimacy.¹²

Treaties and covenants. Ancient Near Eastern treaties described and codified relationships between peoples. They also defined the political relationship between ancient Near Eastern kingdoms. In typical treaty language, the ruling kingdom is the *suzerain* and the subordinate kingdom the *vassal*. Here the term *vassal* connotes not only a relationship of inferiority but also a carefully defined link to the superior kingdom that was solemnized by an oath.¹³ Such a relationship brought a set of reciprocal responsibilities for each party. Generally, the treaty makers wrote down these mutual responsibilities so they could review them periodically, and they often placed them in temples for safekeeping or, perhaps, so the gods would be aware of them.

Old Testament prophets likened God’s covenant relationship with Israel to the marriage bond. Here the artist depicts an exuberant courtship ritual that might have preceded the marriage of Lehi’s sons and Zoram to Ishmael’s daughters. *Love Story*, by Minerva K. Teichert. Courtesy of Brigham Young University Museum of Art. All Rights Reserved.



Shared Elements of Ancient Treaty and Covenant Texts

A striking feature of Old Testament covenant texts is how closely they model the format of ancient Near Eastern treaty texts. The literary elements that these two different kinds of text commonly share are the introduction of the speaker, the historical prologue, a listing of stipulations and obligations, and the calling upon powerful witnesses

such as God or gods who can bring to bear blessings or cursings based on obedience to the stipulations and obligations. The traditional treaty form contains six elements. The following comparison of a Hittite treaty (on the left) and noncontiguous passages from Deuteronomy (on the right) illustrates these elements:

HITTITE TREATY	OLD TESTAMENT COVENANT
1. Introduction of the Speaker	
These are the words of the Sun, Muwatallis, the Great King, King of the land of Hatti, Beloved of the Weather-God. (Muwatallis-Alaksandus of Wilusa = F 5, § 1, I. B 1–2)	These are the testimonies, the statutes, and the ordinances [judgements, KJV], which Moses spoke. (Dt 4:45)
2. Historical Prologue	
When, in former times Labarnas, my grandfather, <i>attacked</i> the land of Wilusa, he conquered (it) . . . The Land of Wilusa never after fell away from the land of Hatti, but . . . remained friends with the king of Hatti. (§ 2, I. B 2–8)	when they came out of Egypt (Dt 4:45) . . . and they took possession of . . . the land of Og. (Dt 4:47).
3. Stipulations	
Thou, Alaksandus, shalt protect the Sun as a friend! (§ 6, I. A 65–7)	. . . thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart. (Dt 6:5).
4. The Document	
Moreover, let someone read thee this tablet which I have made for thee three times every year. (§ 19, III. 73–4)	And thou shalt write on the stones all the words of this law most clearly. (Dt 27:8)
5. The Gods	
The Sun God of heaven, lord of the lands, Shepherd of men, the Sun Goddess of Arinna, the Queen of the lands, the Weather-God. (§ 20, IV. 1–30)	[This day thou art become the people of the Lord thy God. Thou shalt therefore obey the voice of the Lord thy God. (Dt 27:9–10, KJV)]
6. Curse and Blessing	
If thou, Alaksandus, break the words of this document, which are placed on this document, then may these oaths wipe thee out . . . and wipe thy seed from the face of the earth. But if thou keepest these words, then may the thousand gods . . . keep thee, thy wife, thy sons . . . with friendly hand. (§ 21, IV. 31–46)	If thou obeyest the voice of Yahwe thy God by keeping His commandments which I command thee today . . . then all these blessings shall come on thee. . . . If thou dost not obey the voice of Yahwe thy God by keeping His commandments . . . which I command thee today, then all these curses shall come upon thee. (Dt 28:1–2, 15)

This table is adapted from Dennis J. McCarthy, *Treaty and Covenant: A Study in Form in the Ancient Oriental Documents and in the Old Testament* (Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1978), 1–2. The bracketed portion from Deuteronomy 27:9–10 was our addition, as McCarthy did not list a corresponding scriptural passage for number five, “The Gods.” See also Klaus Baltzer, *The Covenant Formulary: In Old Testament, Jewish, and Early Christian Writings*, trans. David E. Green (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971), 10–17. For a discussion of Hittite, Syrian, and Assyrian treaties, see again McCarthy, *Treaty and Covenant*. For a comprehensive treatment of the actual treaties, see *Monumental In-*

scriptions from the Biblical World, vol. 2 of *The Context of Scripture*, ed. William W. Hallo and K. Lawson Younger Jr. (Leiden: Brill, 2000). For a discussion of covenant renewal ceremonies and festivals in the Book of Mormon that follow the preceding pattern, see Stephen D. Ricks, “King, Coronation, and Covenant in Mosiah 1–6,” in *Rediscovering the Book of Mormon*, ed. John L. Sorenson and Melvin J. Thorne (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1991), 209–19; and Blake T. Ostler, “The Covenant Tradition in the Book of Mormon,” in *Rediscovering the Book of Mormon*, 230–40.

Old Testament covenants that highlight God's relationship with Israel are found in the Decalogue (see Exodus 20:2–17; Deuteronomy 5:1–21), the Book of the Law (see Deuteronomy 15–28), the Law of Holiness (see Leviticus 17–26), and most completely in the statute and ordinance ceremony at Shechem (see Joshua 24). These covenants are similar to ancient Near Eastern treaties in that the covenant between God and the Israelites was a type of suzerain and vassal relationship, mirroring the vertical, or hierarchical, relationship between a king and those subject to him. On one side, God *knows* his children and with a covenant recognizes his relationship to them. On the other side, *knowing* the covenant

The Lord promised the house of Israel, upon condition of obedience, that he would honor them above all other nations because keeping the covenant would make them holy.

binds these people to be obedient to the commands of God. As a consequence of their obedience, God promises to *know* them, that is, to acknowledge them as his own—gathering them for protection and blessings (see Deuteronomy 28–30). Incidentally, although there are similarities between treaty language and covenant language, it is important to recognize that treaties are temporary agreements, frequently between a superior and an inferior kingdom—and superiority and inferiority change over time. Conversely, religious covenants are binding and eternal links between humans, who will always remain in obeisance to God, and God himself.

Ancient Near Eastern kings demanded exclusive recognition by subordinate kingdoms, and God expected the same of his children. For example, in a Hittite treaty arrangement, the king required a lesser king in his realm to “*know* only the Sun” (a reference to himself).¹⁴ To the Israelites, God commanded, “Thou shalt have no other gods before me. Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth: Thou shalt not bow down thyself

to them, nor serve them: for I the Lord thy God am a jealous God” (Exodus 20:3–5). Although the word *know* is not mentioned, God's command carried the same requirement of exclusive recognition and of being subject and loyal to him alone.

Ancient Near Eastern Treaties and Biblical Covenants

As previously stated, ancient Near Eastern treaty references to the verb *to know* indicated a legally binding agreement. Similarly, Old Testament usage of this verb in certain instances also indicated a legal and binding covenant.¹⁵ In the ancient Near

East, the basis of suzerainty of one king over another was military might. In conquering a kingdom, the victor vaunted his superiority and the defeated acknowledged it. Among kingdoms, *to know* implied binding a vassal state to pay tribute to a suzerain, in return for which he promised to protect or aid the vassal's citizens against their enemies.¹⁶ Ancient Near Eastern

suzerains often claimed to rule as gods or at least by divine right over their vassals, thus imitating the ancient pattern set by God in his covenant to his children—he would bless them if they remembered and were obedient to him.

God's suzerainty over the house of Israel provided a sharp contrast to earthly suzerains. Prior to rescuing the Israelites from Egypt, God declared his future suzerainty, saying: “And I will take you to me for a people, and I will be to you a God: and ye shall *know* [recognize] that I am the Lord your God, which bringeth you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians. And I will bring you in unto the land, concerning the which I did swear to give it to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob; and I will give it you for an heritage: I am the Lord” (Exodus 6:7–8; emphasis added). Although his suzerainty also was based on might, it was his rescue of the slaves from bondage in Egypt rather than his conquering of them that defined his relationship to them (see Exodus 19:4–5; 20:2). Having established his suzerainty, God, according to his good pleasure, fixed the terms, and the house of Israel, the vassals, accepted them.¹⁷

In a reiteration of these covenant terms in Deuteronomy, one can see clearly each side of the covenant. The basis of this covenant is the Passover and the “passing through.” God established himself as the all-powerful suzerain who declared the covenant terms after he rescued his enslaved people from physical and spiritual bondage by passing *over* their firstborn sons and by having the entire group pass *through* the Red Sea. On the vassal side, we read: “This day the Lord thy God hath commanded thee to do these statutes and judgments: thou shalt therefore keep and do them with all thine heart, and with all thy soul. Thou hast avouched the Lord this day to be thy God, and to walk in his ways, and to keep his statutes, and his commandments, and his judgments, and to hearken unto his voice” (Deuteronomy 26:16–17). By these stipulations, the house of Israel covenanted to be subject to God by obeying all his commandments. On the suzerain side, we are told: “The Lord hath avouched thee this day to be his peculiar people, as he hath promised thee, and that thou shouldest keep all his commandments; and to make thee high above all nations which he hath made . . . that thou mayest be an holy people unto the Lord thy God, as he hath spoken” (Deuteronomy 26:18–19). Thus the Lord promised the house of Israel, upon condition of obedience, that he would honor them above all other nations because keeping the covenant would make them holy.

In this connection, the prophetic anointing of an Israelite king allowed him to stand for the people as a vassal to the suzerain, God. Ze’ev Falk differentiates between the divine status claimed by some ancient Near Eastern kings and the more modest roles of Israelite kings, explaining, “The king [of Israel] was thought to be appointed and even adopted by God; he mediated between God and the people and represented them before each other.”¹⁸ Notwithstanding the differences in kingship, the same meanings of *to know* that characterized ancient Near Eastern treaties also defined the covenant relationship between God and Israel through her king.

Taking these ideas into consideration, we now turn to elements common in both treaty and covenant relationships that use *know* in its legal senses. These senses are: mutual recognition of an exclusive

relationship, promises of aid between the suzerain and the vassal, reacknowledgment demands and ceremonies, and the consequences of lack of mutual recognition or treaty/covenant breaking with attendant consequences. Each of these senses of *know* is found in ancient Near Eastern treaties and in Old Testament covenants.¹⁹ Following are a few examples of each.

Mutual recognition of an exclusive relationship.

In the 14th century BC, the Hittite king Suppiluliumas, who ruled in ancient Anatolia (modern-day central Turkey), wrote to a vassal, Huqqanas, in eastern Asia Minor, stating:

And you, Huqqanas, *know* only the Sun [a designation for the Hittite king] regarding lordship; also my son (of) whom I, the Sun, say, “This one everyone should *know*,” . . . you Huqqanas, *know* him! Moreover, (those) who are my sons, his brother, (or) my brothers . . . *know* as brother and associate. Moreover, another lord . . . do not . . . *know*! The Sun [alone] *know*! . . . Moreover, any other do not *know*!²⁰

This treaty relationship required that the vassal Huqqanas *know* (i.e., acknowledge) the king. Thus Huqqanas must legally recognize the suzerain King



The Lord Appearing unto Abraham, by Keith Larson

Suppiluliumas, as well as the king's sons and brothers. Huqqanas was to look to no one else as his king. The language of the treaty exhorted compliance and fidelity and implied a threat of harsh consequences if Huqqanas recognized any ruler outside the king's family. Here, the verb *to know* denotes an exclusive recognition or loyalty to the suzerain.

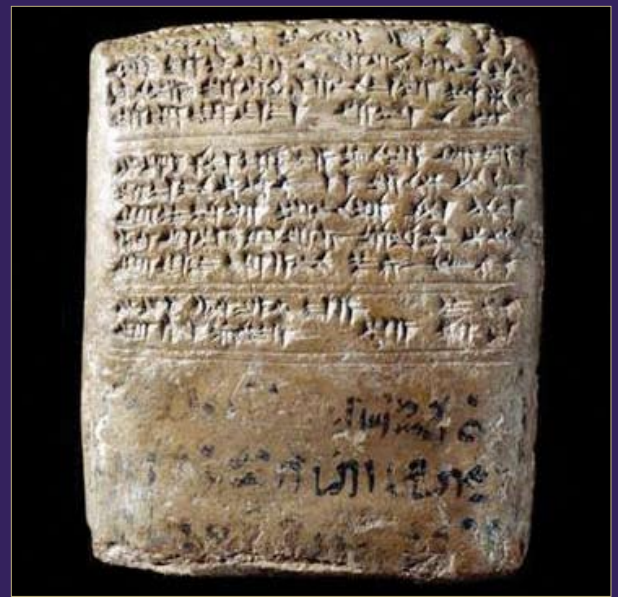
The first Old Testament example of the verb *to know* in this same covenant sense appears in these words of God to Abraham: "I [God] *know* him [Abraham], that he will command his children and his household after him, and they shall keep the way of the Lord, to do justice and judgment; that the Lord may bring upon Abraham that which he hath spoken of him" (Genesis 18:19; emphasis added). God *knew* (i.e., acknowledged) Abraham intimately and was confident that he and his house would be obedient to his commandments because they had entered into a covenant relationship that each party recognized. In addition, Abraham and his household would *know*, meaning "worship," no other gods.

The Old Testament is replete with the idea of intimately knowing God in the sense of acknowledging him. The phrase "know that I am the Lord" is found frequently in the Old Testament, sometimes as intimate covenant language and at other times as acknowledgement of God's power. For instance: "They shall *know that I am the Lord* their God, that brought them forth out of the land of Egypt" (Exodus 29:46; emphasis added); and "The Egyptians shall *know that I am the Lord*, when I stretch forth mine hand upon Egypt, and bring out the children of Israel from among them" (Exodus 7:5; emphasis added). The first phrase illustrates God's desire for the house of Israel to recognize him, even to know him intimately, so that he can live with them (symbolically as husband and wife). In the second, God wants the Egyptians to recognize him as more powerful than their gods in order that they too can enter into a covenant with him.²¹

Perhaps the best parallel to ancient Near Eastern treaty examples, illustrating the exclusiveness of the covenant relationship,²² is this exchange between God and Israel: "I am the Lord thy God from the land of Egypt, and thou shalt *know* no god but me: for there is no saviour beside me. I did *know* thee in the wilderness, in the land of great drought" (Hosea 13:4–5; emphasis added).²³ In this example, God, the suzerain, tells Israel, his vassal, to rec-

ognize no other god. God clarifies the intimacy of and his fidelity to their relationship in a second passage, "You only have I *known* of all the families of the earth" (Amos 3:2; emphasis added). Further, in accord with that covenant, God earlier aided his vassal "in the land of great drought" by rescuing the Israelites with water (see Exodus 15:22–25; 17:3–6).

Promises of aid. The Hittite king Muwatallis (ca. 1308–1285 BC) made a treaty with his vassal, Alaksandus. The king stipulated the following about a third, unnamed party: "As he [the rebel] is an enemy to you, even so is he an enemy to [me] the Sun;



Letter from King Tushratta to Pharaoh Amenophis III of Egypt. This letter, written in Akkadian cuneiform script, informs the pharaoh that a statue of the goddess Ishtar is being sent to him. A similar Amarna tablet from a different vassal king requests military aid from the suzerain Amenophis III on the basis of a covenant agreement. Used by permission of the British Museum.

[and] I, [the Su]n, will *know* only you, Alaksandus.”²⁴ This treaty relationship assured aid to the vassal Alaksandus from his suzerain, King Muwatallis, if the unnamed party attacked him.

The Amarna tablets, cuneiform records dating from the 14th century BC that were found in Egypt, contain an actual case of a vassal requesting aid from his suzerain on the basis of a covenant agreement. The king of Amurru requested military aid from his suzerain, the Egyptian Pharaoh Amenophis III, to help fight against Mitanni, a kingdom

in western Syria, with this plea: “May the king my lord *know* me and put me under the charge of Paḥa(m)nate, my (royal) governor.” Here the phrase including *know* could more clearly be translated as “Let the king, my lord, take care of me,” or “May the king my lord recognize me as a legitimate [loyal] vassal,” and thus provide the support due to me.”²⁵

The following biblical story illustrates breaking and then reestablishing an exclusive relationship between the kingdom of Judah and God. The kingdom of Judah under King Ahaz (ca. 734 BC), who paganized his reign by combining the worship of God

and gold . . . and treasures . . . and sent it for a present. . . . And the king of Assyria hearkened unto him” (2 Kings 16:7–9). Ahaz’s referring to himself as servant and son, as well as his payment of tribute, is indicative of his vassal relationship to King Tiglath-pileser. Thereupon, Tiglath-pileser came to defeat Judah’s enemies. However, God, the highest suzerain, sent the prophet Isaiah to tell King Ahaz, his vassal, not to go to Assyria for aid, promising protection. Because King Ahaz trusted an earthly suzerain more than he did the heavenly one, the kingdom of Judah became entangled in a debilitating relationship with Assyria (see Isaiah 7:1–16). As a consequence of ignoring the commands of God, Isaiah prophesied that Assyria would eventually war against its vassal, the kingdom of Judah (see Isaiah 7:17–25).

The fulfillment of this prophecy took place during the reign of Ahaz’s son, King Hezekiah. Unlike his father, Hezekiah worshipped only the God of Israel, obeyed his commands, and listened to the prophetic words of Isaiah. Thus Hezekiah honored the covenant relationship by serving and obeying God as his suzerain (see 2 Kings 18:3, 5–7; 2 Chronicles 31:20–21; 32:6–8).

In consequence of the kingdom of Judah’s later rebellion against vassalship to Assyria, the Assyrians came to Jerusalem, surrounded the city, and demanded an exclusive treaty relationship (see 2 Kings 18:7, 13–16). King Sennacherib wanted no competition from the suzerains in Egypt or in heaven. Hezekiah received assurance from the Lord through Isaiah that God would protect his vassal (see Isaiah 37:6–7).²⁶ When King Sennacherib sent an additional letter threatening annihilation, Hezekiah responded by going to the temple, spreading out the letter on the temple altar, and again seeking God’s protection (see 2 Kings 19:14–18; Isaiah 37:14–19). He pleaded, “O Lord our God, save us from his [Sennacherib’s] hand, that all the kingdoms of the earth may *know* that thou art the Lord, even thou only” (Isaiah 37:20; also 2 Kings 19:19; emphasis added). While this appearance of *know* is plainly linked to promises made by the Lord in a prior covenant setting, its sense comes closer to “to acknowledge.” Hezekiah thus put to the test the covenant promise of protection.

In answer to Hezekiah’s pleas, God sent “the angel of the Lord” who “smote in the camp of the Assyrians an hundred fourscore and five thousand:



Qumran Cave 4, where fragmentary copies of documents were found that governed the covenant lives of Essenes, a group contemporary with Jesus.

with religious practices of the surrounding cultures, was caught between the exclusive recognition demands of two suzerains: those of the earthly kingdom of Assyria and that of God. While the wording of the political arrangement in the following quotation does not contain the word *know*, a treaty and a covenant relationship are clearly envisioned. “[King] Ahaz sent messengers to Tiglath-pileser king of Assyria, saying, I am thy servant and thy son: come up, and save me out of the hand of the king[s] of Syria . . . and Israel. . . . And Ahaz took the silver

and when they arose early in the morning, behold, they were all dead corpses,” and the Assyrians withdrew (2 Kings 19:35; Isaiah 37:36). Thus *know* in these examples meant a reciprocal promise to give aid; the vassal was dependent upon the suzerain to rescue him from his enemies.

Reacknowledgment. The imperative form of *know* is used to order the vassal to reaffirm an already-existing treaty. For example, the Hittite king Muwatallis wrote to his vassal, Alaksandus, “This tablet which I m[ade] (for) you, Ala[ksandus], [let them re]ad it to you three time[s] yearly, year after year, and you, Alaksandus, *know* it.”²⁷ In this case, the treaty relationship required a periodic public reading and thereby an acknowledgment by the

vassal king of his dependent relationship on the suzerain.

In the Old Testament, the prophet Jeremiah wrote: “I [God] will put my law in their inward parts, and write it in their hearts; and will be their God, and they shall be my people. And they shall teach no more every man his neighbour, and every man his brother, saying, *Know* the Lord: for they shall all *know* me” (Jeremiah 31:33–34; emphasis added). This series of expressions echoes the command of Muwatallis to Alaksandus to review the written treaty regularly. In general, the suzerain expects regular verbal reaffirmation of the treaty. However, God’s reminder here does not involve his people in simply reading aloud the covenant obligations, as in Deuteronomy 31:10–13. Rather, he will give to Israel a new covenant, and they will *know* it most intimately within their hearts, the part of the body that Israelites believed governed thought processes (see Psalm 64:6; Proverbs 2:2; 23:7). Thus *knowing* implies that the “whole individual is engaged” both mentally and emotionally.²⁸ The figurative language lends insight into the level of *knowing* required by an earthly suzerain and the level required by God. The earthly suzerain wants vassals to know the terms of the treaty; however, God wants his vassals not only to *know* the covenant stipulations but also to be in a personal and intimate relationship with him.²⁹

Lack of mutual recognition. In the following illustration, a particular vassal group did not honor a treaty made with the suzerain kingdom of Assyria. In an eighth-century-BC letter to an unnamed Assyrian king, a royal officer named Esarhaddon called the Cimmerians, barbarian invaders from the north, “nomads, [for] they *know* neither an oath by the god(s) nor a sworn agreement [treaty].” Various translations render *know* here as “they do not care for,” “they do not respect,” or “they recognize (as binding) neither.”³⁰ In this case the suzerain *knows*, or recognizes, the legal power of a treaty as binding. Not surprisingly, whatever agreements the suzerain, Assyria, had attempted to force upon the wandering Cimmerians were ignored.

Failure to recognize the exclusiveness of the covenant relationship, or covenant breaking, invoked curses upon the house of Israel as shown in this passage: “You only have I *known* [i.e., chosen to make covenants with] of all the families of the earth: therefore I will punish you for all your iniq-



Jeremiah, by Gustave Doré

uities” (Amos 3:2; emphasis added). In this example, God, unlike earthly suzerains, acknowledged his selective attention to Israel because its people had a covenant relationship best described as a marriage. God was proclaiming his fidelity to the Israelites, to whom he had promised: “Now therefore, if ye will obey my voice indeed, and keep my covenant, then ye shall be a peculiar treasure unto me above

Near Eastern treaties and biblical covenants: mutual recognition of an exclusive treaty/covenant relationship, promises of aid, a requirement of periodically reacknowledging of a treaty/covenant, and consequences for not acknowledging a treaty/covenant. The language of these illustrations implies that both parties understood, first, that the vassal was to give tribute, either financial or in worship, to the suzerain; and second, that the suzerain carried the threat of destroying the vassal if the latter violated his or her obligations.

God fulfilled his covenant obligations; however, his threat of punishment implied Israel’s failure to fulfill its covenant obligations, namely, failure to worship God exclusively.

Covenant Language in the Book of Mormon

Because the Book of Mormon has Old World

all people: for all the earth is mine: And ye shall be unto me a kingdom of priests, and an holy nation” (Exodus 19:5–6). God fulfilled his covenant obligations; however, his threat of punishment implied Israel’s failure to fulfill its covenant obligations, namely, failure to worship God exclusively. In fact, ancient Israel’s introduction of the worship of foreign gods into its society was common (see, for example, 2 Kings 17:7–12; 2 Chronicles 28:2–4; 23–25; Hosea 4:12–5:4).

To illustrate, Isaiah prophesied, “Therefore my people [Israel] are gone into captivity, because they have *no knowledge*” (Isaiah 5:13; emphasis added). “‘The knowledge’ is an abbreviated form of the expression ‘the knowledge of God’” and is a response to God’s saving act of bringing the children of Israel out of bondage in Egypt.³¹ Huffmon conjectured that the “lack of knowledge” in this passage most likely refers to covenant obligations with God, a priestly responsibility.³² Interestingly, Joseph Smith warned of dangerous ramifications in not seeking “knowledge” from God: “A man is saved no faster than he gets *knowledge*, for if he does not get *knowledge*, he will be brought into captivity by some evil power in the other world.”³³ If, as Huffmon contends, “knowledge” has to do with covenant obligations, then Joseph Smith’s prophetic warning teaches that a person is saved no faster than he or she makes and keeps a covenant relationship with God.

In the foregoing examples we find several themes characteristic of the verb *know* in ancient

roots and authors that originated in the ancient Near East—the world of the Old Testament—one would expect that it also would present some or all of the nuances that one finds in the verb *to know* and its noun *knowledge*, as well as the same features of covenant making as they appear in ancient Near Eastern treaties and biblical covenants. The Old Testament covenant model is in fact found in the Book of Mormon. Two of the major purposes of the Book of Mormon as identified on its title page are (1) “to show unto the remnant of the House of Israel . . . that they may *know* the covenants of the Lord”; and (2) “to the convincing of the Jew and Gentile that Jesus is the Christ.”³⁴ Thus an important role of the Book of Mormon is to bring its readers to recognize their covenant relationship with Jesus Christ and the attendant reciprocal obligations that *knowing* implies. Making covenants—or *knowing* the suzerain, Christ—are foundational in the Book of Mormon.

Just as God declared his relationship of suzerainty to Israel during the Exodus, early in the Book of Mormon the Lord declared this same relationship with Lehi and his family in a familiar metaphor:

I will also be your light in the wilderness; and I will prepare the way before you, if it so be that ye shall keep my commandments; wherefore, inasmuch as ye shall keep my commandments ye shall be led towards the promised land; and ye shall *know* that it is by me that ye are led. . . . After ye have arrived in the promised land,

ye shall *know* that I, the Lord, am God; and that I, the Lord, did deliver you from destruction; yea, that I did bring you out of the land of Jerusalem. (1 Nephi 17:13–14)

Just as God led his children out of Egypt, he led this group of his children out of Jerusalem before the Babylonian destruction. The Book of Mormon is replete with references to Old Testament covenants and God's desire to restore covenant *knowledge* to this remnant of his children so that he could make covenants with them as he had done with their forebears at Mount Sinai.

In the Book of Mormon, as in the Old Testament, God is a type of suzerain and the remnant of the house of Israel in the Americas is a type of vassal. In addition, similarities to ancient Near Eastern treaty language and its legal applications of *know* arise in covenant language that elucidates mutual recognition of an exclusive relationship, promises of aid to a vassal, reaffirmation of a covenant agreement, and consequences for lack of mutual recognition. Further, the Book of Mormon delineates unique aspects of covenant making: vassals desiring to *know* the suzerain by making covenants with him, the suzerain producing a succinct list of demands to the vassal, and the special recognition ceremony reaffirming the covenant between suzerain and vassals, similar perhaps to the interaction between Christ and his disciples as he showed them his wounds (Luke 24:39 and John 20:27).

Mutual recognition of an exclusive relationship. The Book of Mormon emphasizes the importance of mutual *knowing*, clearly linking eternal blessings or cursings to recognizing God as one's exclusive Lord. For instance, the Lord responded to Alma's earnest prayer regarding how to judge lapsed believers by saying:

For behold, in my name are they called; and if they *know* me they shall come forth, and shall have a place eternally at my right hand. And it shall come to pass that when the second trump shall sound then shall they that never *knew* me come forth and shall stand before me. And then shall they *know* that I am the Lord their God, that I am their Redeemer; but they would not be redeemed. And then will I confess unto them that I never *knew* them; and they shall depart into everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels. (Mosiah 26:24–27)

In this passage, the wicked, who by choice never enjoyed an intimate and covenantal relationship with the Savior, will eventually acknowledge who he is; nevertheless, without his redeeming power to save them, they must attempt the impossible—to save themselves.

One might ask, how does God recognize which of his children are loyal to their covenant with him? Christ himself answers that question. In his sermon at the temple in Bountiful, the Lord repeats what he said to his listeners in the Old World: “Ye shall *know* them by their fruits” (3 Nephi 14:16; Matthew 7:16; emphasis added). Covenant keepers can be recognized by what they become. To those who have entered into the covenant relationship but not fulfilled its requirements, he will say, “I never *knew* you” (3 Nephi 14:23; Matthew 7:23; emphasis added).³⁵ Conversely, how do his followers *know* that he is their God? God manifests that he *knows* them by fulfilling his covenant promises, as illustrated in the following passage: “And he gathereth his children from the four quarters of the earth; and he numbereth his sheep, and they *know* him; and there shall be one fold and one shepherd; and he shall feed his sheep, and in him they shall find pasture” (1 Nephi 22:25). From this passage we learn that an important aspect of God's *knowing* his people in this covenant agreement is for God to gather his children under his care so that he can care for and protect them.

Promises of aid. When the Nephites acknowledged their covenant with God through obedience, God returned that acknowledgment with protection, deliverance, or some other appropriate response manifesting his caring power. For instance, the Lord said to his people through the prophet Alma:

Lift up your heads and be of good comfort, for I *know* of the *covenant* which ye have made unto me; and I will *covenant* with my people and deliver them out of bondage. And I will also ease the burdens which are put upon your shoulders, that even you cannot feel them upon your backs, even while you are in bondage; and this will I do that ye may stand as witnesses for me hereafter, and that ye may *know* of a surety that I, the Lord God, do visit my people in their afflictions. (Mosiah 24:13–14)

Here the Nephites sought deliverance from their enemy, and God recognized that the stipulations of the covenant bound upon him, as suzerain, the responsibility to bless and care for his vassals. God responded to their pleas for relief by promising his prophet that respite would come so that his people might testify of him.³⁶

Reacknowledgment.

Reminiscent of Jesus's invitation to 10 of his apostles—"Behold my hands and my feet, that it is I myself: handle me, and see" (Luke 24:39), and later to the apostle Thomas, "Reach hither thy finger, and behold my hands; and reach hither thy hand, and thrust it into my side" (John 20:27)—was his similar invitation to the Nephites.

This Book of Mormon example is unique in that those invited were not apostles, a small and select group of men, but a "great multitude" of righteous men, women, and children who came to his holy temple (see 3 Nephi 11:1). The resurrected Christ invited the Nephites to reaffirm their covenant with him in an intimate way, saying: "Arise and come forth unto me, that ye may thrust your hands into my side, and also that ye may feel the prints of the nails in my hands and in my feet, that ye may *know* [i.e., acknowledge] that I am the God of Israel, and the God of the whole earth, and have been slain for the sins of the world" (3 Nephi 11:14). At the conclusion of this recognition scene, we read this statement regarding the participants: "[They] did see with their eyes and did feel with their hands, and did *know* of a surety and did bear record, that it was he, of whom it was written by the prophets, that should come" (3 Nephi 11:15).

Remarking on this experience, President Howard W. Hunter observed, "That experience took time, but it was important that each individual have the experience, that each set of eyes and each



Christ in America, by Jorge Cocco Santangelo

pair of hands have that reaffirming, *personal* witness."³⁷ Each vassal now *knew* intimately his or her suzerain, Christ, and the results were obedience to him and a cessation of war for almost 170 years (see 4 Nephi 1:2). Christ also *knew* his people and their doings individually, as indicated in his words "If [a person] repent not he shall not be numbered among my people, that he may not destroy my people, for behold I *know* my sheep, and they are numbered" (3 Nephi 18:31).

Lack of mutual recognition. In the following prophecy, God *knows* (i.e., recognizes) his children; however, they have been scattered and do not recognize the covenant relationship their ancestors made with him.

And at that day shall the remnant of our seed *know* that they are of the house of Israel, and that they are the *covenant* people of the Lord; and then shall they *know* and come to the *knowledge* of their forefathers, and also to the

knowledge of the gospel of their Redeemer, which was ministered unto their fathers by him; wherefore, they shall come to the *knowledge* of their Redeemer and the very points of his doctrine, that they may *know* how to come unto him and be saved. (1 Nephi 15:14)

According to these prophetic words, the descendants of Lehi will lose their awareness of the covenant; nevertheless, at a future date they will learn of it, embrace it, and gather to the Lord so that he can protect and save them.

Knowing—that is, having made covenants—but refusing to be obedient is called rebellion, as explained by Jeremiah and Ezekiel, and such disobedience involves the heart. Ezekiel prophesied that after God cleansed Israel from her iniquities, “a new heart also will I [God] give you, and a new spirit will I put within you: and I will take away the stony heart out of your flesh, and I will give you an heart of flesh” (Ezekiel 36:26). This same relationship between the heart and covenant knowledge is illustrated in a Book of Mormon passage in which Amulek confesses his lack of consonance between knowledge and actions.

I never have *known* much of the ways of the Lord, and his mysteries and marvelous power. I said I never had *known* much of these things; but behold, I mistake, for I have seen much of his mysteries and his marvelous power; yea, even in the preservation of the lives of this people. Nevertheless, I did harden my heart, for I was called many times and I would not hear; therefore I *knew* concerning these things, yet I would not *know*; therefore I went on rebelling against God, in the wickedness of my heart. (Alma 10:5–6)

Nephi testifies that the voice of Christ came to him with a warning for all who enter into his covenant: “After ye . . . have received the baptism of fire and of the Holy Ghost, and . . . after this should deny [knowing] me, it would have been better for you that ye had not [ever] *known* me” (2 Nephi 31:14). Unlike ancient Near Eastern treaty relationships that often are the result of conquering by force, covenants with God are entered into voluntarily. Thus one who willingly enters into covenant with God is forewarned of serious ramifications for breaching the covenant.

In this vein, covenant breaking invokes curses or, less severely, the withholding of certain promised blessings. The only way for the vassal to avoid punishment is to *know* the suzerain in the sense of recognizing him. In this context the prophet Abinadi foretold the demise of King Noah. His prophecy implied that Noah refused to recognize God, although he had been raised with that knowledge: “The life of king Noah shall be valued even as a garment in a hot furnace; for he shall *know* [i.e., recognize] that I am the Lord” (Mosiah 12:3). “Who is Abinadi,” King Noah had boldly questioned, “that I and my people should be judged of him, or who is the Lord, that shall bring upon my people such great affliction?” (Mosiah 11:27). In this case, an earthly suzerain had failed to recognize that he was a vassal to the heavenly suzerain. King Noah did not heed the prophetic warning, and the consequence for him was death by burning (see Mosiah 19:20). King Noah’s refusal to recognize the Lord as God was catastrophic both for himself and, frighteningly, for his people (see Mosiah 11:2–23).³⁸

Desiring to know and make covenants. Several Book of Mormon passages illustrate the desire of individuals as well as whole groups of people to initiate entering into covenant with God, a dimension of *know* not paralleled in the Old Testament.³⁹ Perhaps the most poignant example is the plea of the Lamanite king who desired to *know* the heavenly king: “O God, Aaron [a missionary] hath told me that there is a God; and if there is a God, and if thou art God, wilt thou make thyself *known* unto me, and I will give away all my sins to *know* thee” (Alma 22:18). This example is particularly remarkable because one who had been an earthly suzerain desired to become a vassal to God, the highest suzerain, hoping that his repentance would be an acceptable offering for that privilege.

After King Benjamin taught his people that Christ is the only source of salvation and outlined the obligations and consequences of enlisting him as their suzerain, the people declared their desire to “take upon [themselves] the name of Christ” (Mosiah 5:8). However, King Benjamin issued a severe warning that they must *know* his name, meaning that they must recognize Christ’s authority, in order to receive salvation (see Mosiah 5:14–15).

Recognition demands. As noted previously, in both ancient Near Eastern treaties and in Old Testament covenants, punishment resulted from lack of

exclusive recognition of the suzerain or God. The Book of Mormon clearly identifies what one must *know* and do in order to please God:

Know ye that ye are of the house of Israel.

Know ye that ye must come unto repentance, or ye cannot be saved.

Know ye that ye must lay down your weapons of war, and delight no more in the shedding of blood, and take them not again, save it be that God shall command you.

*Know ye that ye must come to the knowledge of your fathers, and repent of all your sins and iniquities, and believe in Jesus Christ, that he is the Son of God, and that he was slain by the Jews, and by the power of the Father he hath risen again, whereby he hath gained the victory over the grave; and also in him is the sting of death swallowed up. . . . And ye will also *know* that ye are a remnant of the seed of Jacob; therefore ye are numbered among the people of the first covenant. (Mormon 7:2–5, 10)*

The first demand is similar to one mentioned previously between King Suppiluliamas and his vassal Huqqanas. However, God expects more than a legal recognition of him as the reigning monarch. From this list of requirements, we can see a broader scope in the expectations of a covenant relationship with God than is found in ancient Near Eastern treaty agreements and in the extant Old Testament covenants. The Book of Mormon requirements as described by the prophet Mormon form a much more succinct list in comparison with the catalogue of statutes, judgments, and commandments given in Deuteronomy. As is the prerogative of the suzerain, God commanded his people in the Americas to recognize that they are part of his kingdom, that they are to be obedient to his laws or face destruction, that they are to fight only on his command, and that they are to believe in him. Mormon's Israelite forebears had made a similar covenant and also had been required to enter into this relationship with God by undergoing rites of acceptance (see Exodus 24; Leviticus 26; Deuteronomy 27–29; Joshua 8:30–35). The commandments of God are centered in *knowing* (acknowledging) the covenant relationship

and *knowing* intimately the giver of the law. This means voluntary obedience to requirements so that he can change human hearts. As the suzerain, God sets the demands of the covenant, and those who seek his salvation agree to abide by them.

Treaties, Covenants, and Connections

These few examples from the Book of Mormon illustrate the binding nature of the covenant relationship through mutual and personal acknowledgment on the part of both God and his children. The Book of Mormon states clearly how one is to *know* God and explains blessings and cursings associated with obedience or disobedience to the always-generous stipulations of the covenant. God's covenant relationship in the Book of Mormon with a remnant of the house of Israel is linguistically similar to ancient Near Eastern treaty associations and is semantically identical to descriptions of his relationship with Israel in the Old Testament.

The examples cited further indicate that the word *know* was used in ancient Near Eastern treaties and in Old Testament and Book of Mormon covenants to express both the exclusive and binding nature of the suzerain/vassal relationship. The parallel uses of *know* in treaty and covenant relationships demonstrate similarities in concept between suzerain and vassal treaties in the ancient Near East and covenant relationships between God and his children as they appear in the Old Testament and Book of Mormon. Further, the Book of Mormon mentions unique aspects of covenants; for instance, it describes individuals as well as groups initiating a covenant relationship with God and reports an intimate recognition ceremony between God and a multitude of his children. The connection between the covenant relationship of the Old Testament and the Book of Mormon illustrates the rich complexity of the Book of Mormon.⁴⁰ The linguistic and semantic similarities within the ancient Near Eastern treaties and covenants in the Book of Mormon reach remarkable levels of subtlety. Such similarities stand as further evidence that the historical and spiritual roots of the Book of Mormon lie in the world of the Old Testament and the ancient Near East.⁴¹ 